

## JHUMPA LAHIRI'S *THE LOWLAND*: A TALE OF A MYSTERIOUS JOURNEY

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### ABSTRACT

'The Lowland' by Jhumpa Lahiri is a tale of two identical brothers Subhash and Udayan with different frames of mind and a female protagonist Gouri with a mysterious attitude towards life. The consequences in the novel were the backwash of Udayan's involvement in the Naxalit movement. Udayan's execution before his parents and a pregnant wife brought a corollary change in Mitra family and an eclectic change in Gouri's life making her gloomy and mysterious to understand by Subhash and Bela, her daughter from Udayan. Gouri supported Udayan in his naxalite activities and hence was responsible for his death. Her failure to fulfill the expectation haunts her throughout the life and we observe her running away from her present and past which ultimately lead her to an uncertain, pathetic, isolated future and miss the point of her importance in the life of Bela as well as misjudge Subhash as a soul owner of Bela. Gouri's behavior in the entire novel was the outcome of her thinking that she was not an ordinary woman, which ultimately made her a woman of significance and more feminist. Evaluating Gouri's point of view and the journey of the individuals is the main theme of this paper.

**KEYWORDS:** Psychology, Mystery, Patriarchy, Rebel, Sympathy

### INTRODUCTION

The Lowland by Jhumpa Lahiri is having more authoritative, bolder women characters compare to the man except, Udayan. It is the forth book penned down by Lahiri sharing with the readers the immigrant experiences in the distant land. In an interview with Srebotnjak in Isabela Bader theatre she shared that at a certain point in her life she heard about the execution of two brothers before their parents and relatives eyes which provided her with the seed of the story though she never knew these two brothers. Subhash and Udayan for the author are absolutely imaginary characters and marriage with Gouri and her accompanying Subhash to America while pregnant with Udayan's baby in the search of happiness is all imaginary. The naxalite movement in the background is the mysterious happening she used to come across when Lahiri was very young (4 years old in 1971). All her relatives and Bengali friends of her parents used to talk about it as it was going on in their motherland which seems to be scary. According to the author Naxalite movement is the recent history which, her extended family members used to share with her family. The author portrays day to day life, the unrest it causes, student's involvement in the movement and educational system affected by movement at the time of 1970's. This movement had effects and affects on the Mitra family. Somehow, author indicated that it was Gouri and her psychological response to every situation which was the cause of downfall of almost four generations of a happy family.

### FAMILY BACKGROUND

In novel the birth of Subhash and Udayan took place in 1944 and 1945 keeping fifteen months distance in between. While in the case of Manash and Gouri, Gouri was born in 1948 as a last child to her parents when her father was

retired and ready to settle the marriages of her elder sisters. Manash was the only person in her family with whom she felt close compare to other siblings. While, in the case of Subhash and Udayan, Subhash had no sense of himself without Udayan. He was aware that- "*From his earliest memories, at every point, his brother was there.*" (p. 6) and, for parents Subhash was never a cause to worry still they never favour him. Explanation for this is given too-"*It became his mission to obey them, given that it wasn't possible to surprise or impress them. That was what Udayan did.*" (p. 11). As, the novel proceed we can see that two brothers got separated first time to two of cities best colleges in 1964. And, here, Udayan got in contact of Naxalite movement, while unable to foresee its consequences. Through Manash he met Gouri and they secretly got married without intimating the parents and relatives from both sides and the mediator Manash. At the time of their marriage Subhash was in USA pursuing PhD in Oceanography.

Udayan was ready to keep his newly wedded wife away from his parents as he was not a kind of person who believes in joint family but had to take her to some safe shelter as he was not earning to feed her. Gouri's, entry in the family was a shock for Udayan's parents as she was not a very attractive girl moreover; she was a stumbling block in their expectation of grand marriage of their elder son. But still in Udayan's case Bijoli(mother of Subhash and Udayan) was ready to accept Gouri because-"*She'd hoped that having a wife would settle him, that it would distract him from his politics.*" (p. 188) But, Gouri actively supported Udayan in his politics. She used to take tuition of two siblings from where she had to keep a watch on a Police who was the obstacle in Udayan's movement. Beside that she used to carry secrete messages of Udayan for his fellow comrades. Udayan's involvement in a murder of the police brought him in the limelight and ultimately to his destiny. He was executed before the eyes of his parents and neighbors and yes a pregnant wife of which he was not aware of.

Udayan's death brought Subhash from Rhode Island to India to console his parents but seeing him Bijoli was not ready to show any happiness but felt in her heart hatred towards Subhash-

*"Rage at Subhash for reminding her so strongly of Udayan, for sounding like him, for remaining a spare version of him. She'd overheard him talking with Gouri, paying attention to her, being kind."* (p. 186)

When Subhash told his mother about his marriage decision she bluntly replied- "*He was risking everything, and they were never to enter the house as husband and wife.*" (p. 186) Bijoli's intentions here was clear sign of hurting Subhash as well as dissuading him from marriage. She said it because –

*"A girl she did not like to begin with, did not want in her family, was going to become her daughter-in-law twice over. She said it because it was Gouri not Bijoli, who contained a piece of Udayan in her womb."* (p.186)

The boldness of Bijoli was lost with Udayan's death. What left to her was again supposed to be taken away, this was cause of her worry. The complex structure of Bijoli's thinking leads us to think about the Oedipus complex. She fully meant what she said. In the other parts of novel reader could see that Subhash and Gouri never returned to the Tollygunge and this again was shame for a mother to lose her remaining son-

*"They have not returned, either together or separately, to Tollygunge; they have stayed far from it, away. So that she feels the deepest shame a mother can feel of not only surviving one child but losing another, still living."* (p.186)

Mr. and Mrs. Mitra never recovered from the shock of Udayan's death and Subhash's marriage to Gouri. Mr. Mitra never talked with Bijoli as he used to talk earlier, he stopped sitting on the terrace from where they witnessed

execution of Udayan and he died secluded without the interference of any of his family members.

## GOURI' POINT OF VIEW

Gouri was married to Udayan in January 1970, without caring about her relatives – “*The only one in her family she cared about was Manash*”. (p.287) When Udayan went to tell his parents about his marriage they were shocked but were ready to accept Gouri in their house because their other son was in America and they wanted their remaining son at home. But, Gouri was thinking to avoid circumstances to go to her in-laws place-

“*Secretly Gouri had hoped that his parents would not take them in. In that cluttered but cheerful house in Chetla, hiding with Udayan, she'd felt at once brazen and protected. Free.*” (p. 288)

Gouri was taken in and her mother-in-law had told her, “*The first morning, to put away the books she'd brought with her, and concentrate on the task at the hand.*”(p. 290).She was happy with Udayan and so she was not worried about the daily chores because Udayan used to tell her that one day his brother will come to India and after his marriage, “*There would be another daughter-in-law to do her share.*” (p. 290) Unaware of future Gouri used to wonder who that woman would be. Here in this house Udayan started asking her to do certain things. She agreed to help him, in order to feel the part of him. First the task was simple but a part of larger structure which Udayan intentionally avoid to tell her. Unaware of future consequences Gouri helped Udayan by spying on a Policeman but dare to ask why? This was the first time she got the answer from her naxalite husband- “*The policeman's route passed a safe house, he said. They needed to know his schedule, his days off. There were comrades needing shelter. They needed him out of the way.*” (p. 293). Udayan killed the policeman and caught red handed. Being a part of a murder, Gouri felt shattered emotionally. She was never happy after that.

When Subhash come to India, he observed Gouri wearing a white Sari, eating vegetarian food, living dejected/rejected life of a widow, questioned by policemen every now and then and above all ignored by his parents. Subhash took a decision to marry Gouri and took her away from his parents and from Calcutta so that the child would never know the execution of Udayan’s and Gouri could continue with her study. He kept the decision before his parents who accused him of wrongly taking the place of Udayan. Besides all the clashes he was firm in his thoughts to marry Gouri which he did out of duty to the family. The week before going to America Gouri went to the Jadavpur to see the policeman’s family, to witness the loss she brought to them. While returning she was thinking that they might never have the thought of her being guilty, her participation unnoticed – “*Though she had hand in something they would mourn all their lives, she had already slipped from their mind.*” (p. 295)

Gouri was certain that her first husband Udayan, whom she loved more than her life had used her and she made her ashamed of herself. At the of Udayan’s execution policemen asked Udayan to see his family last time. He turned his face to Gouri and she looked at him as she looked never before- “*It was a look of disillusion. A revision of everything they'd once shared.*” (p. 339). From the beginning Udayan was aware of the risk what he was doing. But he continued deceiving Gouri and his parents. Gouri first time in her life felt as an orphan. She faced the death of her both parents at the early age of sixteen but there was a relief as she was from her childhood living with her grandparents in Calcutta and Manash was there always besides her. Considering the consequences after Gouri’s marriage with Udayan and his sudden death Gouri for her in-laws was a burden that they wanted to overload but they couldn’t as Gouri was carrying Udayan’s child inside her. This revelation was too a shock for Gouri. She was thinking about the baby in her womb while in plane

going to America, to be with Subhash her second husband, a second father to her child –

*"She felt as if she contained a ghost, as Udayan was. The child was a version of him, in that it was both present and absent. Both within her and remote. She regarded it with a sort of disbelief, just as she still did not really believe that Udayan was gone, missing now not only from Calcutta but from every other part of the earth she'd just flown across."* (p. 124)

This hallucination kept prevailing in Gouri's thoughts after the birth of Bela, a daughter not a son. When Bela was four one day she had a letter arrived from Manash, which she resisted reading but still in her heart she was secretly waiting for a news from Udayan so that she could acknowledge him of Bela, the family they would have shared. While in USA she felt free. Subhash let her feel so. He was not burden to her and she was not to him. Just like Gouri's parents Subhash gave her autonomy on herself again and from here onward she was shown behaving accustomed to the new culture away from her strict mother-in-law. Gouri's first interaction with the Indian couples in Professor Narasimhan's party was appreciative for Subhash. After the party while coming home Subhash asked her if they could invite the women in their house sometime, they might be helpful in future when baby would born? Gouri's answer was very curt and hurting. She simply denied her existence as a painted doll in the corner of a hall. She said,

*"I don't need their advice."*

*"I meant as companion."*

*"I don't want to spend my time with them."*

*"Why not, Gouri?"*

*"I have nothing in common with them," she said.* (p. 140)

Subhash after this incident got alert about Gouri but he got a big shock when Gouri after few days later, was not at home as usual. He found- *"In one corner of the room all her Saris, petticoats and blouses, were lying in ribbons and scrapes of various shapes and sizes, as if an animal had shredded the fabric with its teeth and claws."* (p. 141) He was very angry with her this time because he felt that such destructive behavior of Gouri might cause harm to the Childs upbringing. Gouri never apologized for what she did but she took Subhash granted for such small guilt's she was committing. Gouri's such destructive nature (getting rid of) is the starting point of a psychological journey in Mitra family and surely there was lot more to come. Gouri by her every small act started to show (herself, Udayan, Subhash, and her in-laws) that she was different and no more the same wife whom Udayan and Subhash married. Gouri at this, wanted to get rid of so many things first of Subhash and Bela, her past, her guilt, Udayan and his memories but she couldn't. The only option she has before her was to kept herself engaged studying Philosophy, to solve the puzzle of time and so wholeheartedly she get involved into the study forgetting her own child Bela and duty of a mother.

## LAHIRI'S FRAMED CHARACTERS

With the birth of Bela Lahiri wanted to raise the question of parenting and what role parents play in the life of the child. Lahiri herself accepted that *The Lowland* is about the impact of family history on a family; it's about family, about parenthood and what it means to be a parent. Also, Lahiri wanted to show about, violence, a literal violence and an emotional violence that was perpetuating between family and in relationship too. For Lahiri, *The Lowland* is a book about loss, love, distance, separation, loyalty and betrayal. If we see every word of author we can observe that every character is

framed in a particular manner. Gouri was framed to ignore Bela. Her loyalty towards Bela, Subhash, Udayan, in-laws supposed to be question. I will not go far if I say that Gouri's journey was a psychological one. She betrayed Subhash, her second husband first time when she saw a man watching at her though never stopped to introduce himself. Though there was no direct contact but that man stunned her for few days. Her constant attachment with past made her ignore Bela and in that the guilt of hiding the truth from Bela that Subhash is not her original father but a uncle or a step-father was hallucinating her more. She day by day tried to engage with study and registered for PhD in Philosophy. This PhD work used to keep her away from her maternal duties which she intentionally wanted to. But her obsession for the work increase so vast that she had fear of losing it some or other day. Such an obsession a mother must have for a child but Lahiri here clearly indicates the replacement of Bela with a PhD thesis. Bela didn't mind her mother being involved with study so much because she had her loving father Subhash always with her to take care of her. But one day she understood/sensed that Gouri's study room was her bedroom too and there was no attachment (relation) as a husband and wife among her parents.

## **EFFECT ON BELA AND SUBHASH**

Subhash's father died, when Bela was at the verge of twelve so Subhash and Bela went to finish the rituals. It was first time after marriage with Gouri Subhash was going back to his home. Gouri left behind in USA as she had to finish her thesis. When Bela came back to USA, to her house she found her mother not there to welcome her. Instead, her letter was there to inform that she left them back to move to California, where she will join in a college to teach. This last act of Gouri came as a shock to Subhash and Bela, but it was Bela who stand firm besides Subhash saying, "*I'll never go away from you, Baba.*" (p. 212) Subhash kept thinking on the topic of his marriage with Gouri, he was sure that they are not happy with their marriage and what his mother prophesized once was true, but he never thought that Gouri would lack the patient of waiting for Bela's maturity. Out of three women in Subhash's life he felt the loss of two and left with one. He thought about his mother and for her, "*Wilderness was her only freedom.*" (p. 212) while for Gouri – "*Gouri's mind had saved her. It had enabled her to stand upright. It had cleared a path for her. It had prepared her to walk away.*" (p.213) Bela started to hate Subhash for not bringing her mother; still he was not sure that this was the right time to tell Bela about Udayan as her biological father, not him.

Bela behaviour towards Subhash from that day onwards changed. In one part of her personality she became Gouri. Seeing Bela changed he used to blame himself for taking Bela to Tollygunge and giving Gouri a chance to escape. Many a time he wanted to call Gouri and tell her that – "*You have left her with me and yet you have taken her away, he wanted to say.*" (p.216)A time came when he was agree to send Bela to psychologist name, Dr. Emily Grant. Bela's high school days came and she joined the nature study club and from here onward she changed herself. For college she preferred a small liberal arts school but for graduate school Bela showed no interest-

*"She told him she did not want to spend her life inside a university, researching things. She learned enough from books and labs. She didn't want to cut herself off that way."* (p. 221)

Bela's words were genetically responding to her biological father Udayan not biological mother Gouri. Somehow it was a relief to Subhash. Bela's first job was as a veteran on a farm in Western Massachusetts. Here onward we can see her working and living a nomadic life. Getting engaged in the work is kind of therapy to Bela just like her mother. She used to come back to Subhash when she wished. He somehow now understood that- "*Her sense of limits was fierce. And though she seemed to have found herself, he feared that she was still lost.*" (p. 223)

Bela's reappearances in Subhash's life used to be very short but he was happy in a scattered living she searched her identity –

*"Bela's second birth felt more miraculous than the first. It was a miracle to him that she had discovered meaning in her life. That she could be resilient, in the face of what Gouri had done."* (p. 225)

But still Subhash sometimes felt afraid of Udayan who might come to claim Bela. The same fear Gouri lived with. Bela was certain of one thing, "*She will never marry, she knows this about herself. The unhappiness between her parents: this has been the most basic awareness of her life.*" (p. 258) When she was younger she used to blamed her father for driving her mother away, and not finding out the way to bring her back. The half truth she was aware of made her behave abnormally in the teenage and maturity. We must say that it was Bela's revenge on Subhash. "*Everything in Bela's life has been a reaction.*" (p. 259) Even Bela's pregnancy at the age of forty with a man who was unaware of truth and according to her who was not a type of father she was expecting for her child was a surprise for Subhash. With this pregnancy Bela wanted to come back to Subhash's life just like Gouri came to him in the past. But Subhash took a firm step to tell the truth to Bela that he is not her real Father but a step-father, an uncle which made Bela furious to leave the home. Bela now first time in her life got the answer why her mother left her alone. Bela took few days to recover and understood the space Subhash had in her life because she herself was in the stage of lying to her child as her mother Gouri did. So she came to Subhash denouncing Udayan's place in her life and when her daughter was born she told Subhash that she love him as a father more than she used to loved him in her childhood. This love made her to protect Subhash from Gouri's second appearance in his life.

## CONCLUSIONS

Gouri in America declared herself different from other Indian woman and accepted the American feminist way in her outlook. But in other way for her this was her response to get rid of herself and her past, from her natural beauty which Udayan used to admire. This white feminist approach towards life leads her to economic and family freedom, in short independence. She preferred to study because her grandfather died with a book on his chest who was a Professor of Sanskrit. She wanted to study and teach philosophy so that she could solve the mystery of time. It seems that from childhood she was a mystery to herself and that might be the reason she could grasp the philosophy so easily. Her traveling to unfamiliar places, her fragmented existence and above all her drastic decision made her a woman with two sides in her life in California, an honest teacher and a dishonest wife and mother. She used to attain conferences to maintain visibility and status, a fake status. It is said like in love nothing can be destroyed forever and in Gouri's case self-destruction was her revenge to Udayan whom she loved dearly. So even though she was trying to keep herself away from Bela she used to search her on internet sites. All and all Gouri throughout her life paid the price for going after her dreams and at the end left alone regretting for her mistakes. Lahiri framed Gouri and all her characters in such way to show her responsible for a mysterious happenings in a long journey of a middle class happy family.

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